



Male Social Workers In a Female Majority Profession

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Abstract

Social work is long established as a female majority profession, with the ratio of male to female practitioners continuing to widen. There are campaigns to broaden recruitment to better represent the communities' social workers serve, and historically and contemporarily this has included targeting men.

A scoping review was undertaken, the themes of which are discussed, establishing how existing research around gender and masculinity in the social work workforce has focussed on students. However, where recruitment campaigns aim to get more men into the workforce, how do qualified practitioners experience and make sense of masculinity?

This paper introduces an ongoing doctoral research study, using interpretative phenomenological analysis to address the research question 'how do statutory children and families social workers make sense of expressions of masculinity?'

Introduction

This paper follows a presentation at the CEDA 2026 conference and aims to contextualise an ongoing professional doctorate research project exploring how statutory children and families social workers make sense of expressions of masculinity. The wider research context underpinning this study is discussed, and the development of the research question through a scoping review will be outlined. The proposed value of this research, and next steps will be laid out.

For the researcher, reflecting as a social work educator, they wondered how the qualities emphasised as male within historic recruitment campaigns would have appealed to them when they were considering studying social work and led to reflections around their



experiences of masculinity. For social workers still practicing in the context of children and families statutory social work, how do they experience masculinity and what does this mean to them?

Research Context

Within the social work workforce, there is a longstanding issue of the ratio of men to women. In the UK this has been discussed historically in the context of social work being seen as a 'non-traditional' occupation for men (Christie, 1998). However, this trend is not UK specific, with Pease (2011) highlighting a parallel within the Australian, American and Canadian social work workforce.

In England, the Department for Education (DfE) began measuring the children and family social work workforce in 2013. This information is gathered through an annual statutory census, and the trend is clear. As of 2025 (DfE, 2026a), 88% of children and family social workers were female and this increases annually.

Other occupations gendered as 'helping professions' such as teaching (DfE 2026b) and nursing (NMC, 2025) face similar trends. However, McPhail (2004) urges not to consider social work as female-dominant, instead advocating for social work to be considered female majority given the overrepresentation of men in positions of leadership.

As part of efforts to address underrepresentation in the workforce, government departments set targets for the fast-track qualifying social work courses they fund. This required attracting more students from a range of groups, and, within this included men (Samuel 2023a, 2023b).

While debate around the underlying assumptions about masculinity within previous recruitment campaigns is established (Pease, 2011; Hicks, 2008.), it is social work students that are the focus of research in this area (Galley, 2020; Schaub, 2017; Parker and Crabtree, 2014). The perspective of qualified workers, and specifically, those working in statutory children and family teams has been overlooked. This is particularly important to consider, given that this could inform future recruitment campaigns.



Initial Scoping Review

A scoping review was undertaken and was chosen as a form of evidence synthesis in order to systematically map the breadth and nature of knowledge available on a defined topic (Munn et al, 2018). This includes research evidence, relevant policy and both theoretical and practice based literature in order to identify key concepts, sources of evidence and gaps in understanding. This provides an overview of what is known, and where further enquiry may be needed (Moher et al, 2015).

The review followed Arksey and O'Malley's (2005) framework. 68 papers were included within the scope of the review, which sought to answer the review question "how are theories of masculinity discussed and related to the profession in social work literature?". This focus explicitly on theories of masculinity, was due to a tension in historic recruitment campaigns that reflected assumptions about gender and masculinity which were at odds with social work values (Pease, 2011).

Two overarching themes with subsequent subthemes were developed and identified. The first theme was practice orientated and focussed on social workers working *with* men. To illustrate some of the focus within this theme, one subtheme related to social worker's engagement with fathers. The second overarching theme considered men and masculinity *in* the profession. Most identified studies within this theme focussed on the experience of students who were studying towards a social work qualification. Subthemes for example included the masculinity of individuals.

This left two notable intersecting gaps. The first was that very little research focussed on qualified practitioner's experiences of masculinity, whether theoretical or embodied. The second was that there was very little research focussing on the specific experience in children and families services. Given that this is a focus of current recruitment, these two gaps led to the development of the research question behind this study "how do statutory children and families social workers make sense of expressions of masculinity?".

Subsequent IPA Study

As the scoping review highlighted the lack of research drawing on the experiences of qualified social workers, it was this population made up the sample. Where recruitment campaigns have sought to attract more men into social work, understanding the experience of those already in the profession felt crucial. As these campaigns have sought to recruit



specifically into children and families services, the recruitment of the sample was further targeted to this context.

Ten semi-structured interviews have been undertaken, following recruitment through one local authority children and family directorate. Ethics was obtained through both the university, and, the local authority.

This study uses Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as a methodology . This is due to the emphasis on peoples lived experience and how they make sense of this in the context of their personal and social worlds (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2022). There is a growing precedent and body of work within social work research utilising IPA, in part because of the overlap in the use of practitioner skills, values and assumptions (Vicary and Ferguson, 2024).

Potential Value of the Research

While generalised findings are not the goal of IPA (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2022), insights may resonate with social work practitioners. Participants drew on examples from their own lives, considering how these influenced how they made sense of masculinity. As a result, the research has the potential to encourage practitioners to reflect on their own experiences of masculinity, and how this shapes their professional identity, their relationships, and their practice. Given the phenomenon of 'ghost fathers' (Brown et al., 2009) and consistent findings about a lack of engagement with men in families (Brandon, Philip and Clifton, 2019), this reflection may encourage more reflexive and inclusive practice around gendered expectations.

For social work educators, being able to connect experiences and sense making of those in practice, to the literature already available around the experiences of social work students may offer a rich bridge, connecting the classroom to practice, and offering social work students insight into how those already in the profession have made sense of issues and experiences they may be grappling with.

Conclusion

This paper provides the background and context for an ongoing study using interpretative phenomenological analysis exploring how statutory children and families social workers make sense of expressions of masculinity.

Moving forward, insights from this study may inform future recruitment campaigns, by drawing on the experience of those working in statutory children and families social work



roles. In turn, the proposed research may contribute to efforts to widen the pool of potential applicants to the profession, potentially increasing the number of students entering social work training.

This contribution is particularly relevant due to ongoing challenges in recruiting and retaining staff (Social Work England, 2024). Recruitment and retention remain costly (Curtis et al., 2010), and qualifying fast-track routes require significant financial investment from the government (Stevenson, 2018).

Data analysis of the transcribed interviews begins in September 2026, with the thesis submission due in Spring 2028.

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